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ABSTRACT

A common technique to aid in developing critical thinking skills is to suggest pertinent and key questions and recommend that readers engage in an internal dialogue to answer these questions. This approach can be used effectively in reading newspaper articles and will become more useful with practice. Twelve constructive questions that newspaper readers can ask themselves to help process information more skillfully are (1) What kind (genre) of journalism is it? (2) What kind of occurrence or event produced the news story? (3) In terms of traditional news values, why is this story in the paper? (4) Was this event created in order to get coverage? (5) What is the writer's background? (6) Is there obvious bias on the part of the writer of the article (or the writer of the headline)? (7) Is it possible to verify the information in the article? (8) What sources are used in the newspaper article? (9) What kind of play is given to the story? (10) What is omitted or left out? (11) How is the event framed? and (12) What are the "latent" values being transmitted by the news articles? If this kind of critical thinking could be applied by more people to the reading of newspapers, the result would be a less gullible and better informed public. (NKA)

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# How to Read a Newspaper Article

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A paper presented to the Conference 87 on Critical Thinking, Christopher Newport College, Newport News, Virginia, April 9-12, 1987.

Abstract

Information taken from newspapers appears to be processed in a rather casual and superficial manner. Intelligent consumers of the news are needed now, perhaps more than ever. Readers are still taken in by newspaper hoaxes, and astrology columns are very popular. Public understanding of a complex political event such as Watergate seems to lag far behind that of journalists and what is available in the public record. This paper attempts to apply the critical thinking approach to the reading of newspaper articles. Twelve key questions are suggested that will help a person to read a newspaper article more skillfully.

How To Read a Newspaper Article

Information taken from newspapers appears to be processed in a rather casual and superficial manner. One study indicated the time spent reading the newspaper has dropped from 23 minutes in 1960 to 14 minutes in 1970.[1] In addition, people discard much of the information they get from the news, and assign the rest to gross categories that some researchers have called schemas.[2]

This paper argues that readers of newspapers could benefit from what has been called the "critical thinking" approach. This movement in education developed primarily in the fields of philosophy and rhetoric. It has now matured to the point that the teaching of courses in critical thinking is required in California colleges.[3]

Intelligent consumers of the news are needed now, perhaps more than ever. Readers are still taken in by newspaper hoaxes,[4] and astrology columns are very popular.[5] Public understanding of a complex political event such as Watergate seems to lag far behind that of journalists and what is

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1 Philip Meyer, The Newspaper Survival Book (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985).

2 Doris A. Graber, Processing the News: How People Tame the Information Tide. (New York: Longman, 1984).

3 Diane F. Halpern, "Teaching Thinking/About Thinking," Contemporary Psychology 31, no. 2 (1986), p. 125.

4 Curtis D. MacDougall, Hoaxes, 2nd ed. (New York: Dover, 1958); Daniel Cohen, Myths of the Space Age (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1967).

5 Bart J. Bok and Lawrence E. Jerome, Objections to Astrology (Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus, 1975), p. 21; Derek Parker, Astrology in the Modern World (New York: Taplinger, 1970), p. 113.

available in the public record.[6] Studies in such crucial areas as international relations and nuclear weapons have found widespread ignorance of basic facts and concepts.[7] A recent study of television news, although not directly applicable to newspapers, suggests that news consumers miss the point of many stories. The researchers found that the average viewer fails to understand the main points of two-thirds of all major TV news stories.[8]

Evidence indicates that few students have the knack for carefully and critically reading what they have read,[9] and that the average college student is a poor and incompetent reader.[10] If these findings are correct, then it is probably even more true that few people know how to give a critical reading to their newspapers.

This paper attempts to draw upon the critical thinking approach to suggest some methods for the critical reading of newspaper articles. A common technique in the literature on critical thinking is to suggest pertinent and key questions and recommend that readers engage in a kind of dialogue with themselves to answer the questions. Little's methodology for critical thinking[11] uses this approach, as does Adler and Van Doren's classic volume

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6 Gladys Engel Lang and Kurt Lang, The Battle for Public Opinion: The President, the Press, and the Polls During Watergate (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), pp. 32-34.

7 Herbert H. Hyman and Paul B. Sheatsley, "Some Reasons Why Information Campaigns Fail," in Wilbur Schramm and Donald F. Roberts, eds., The Process and Effects of Mass Communication, rev. ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971), pp. 200-211; James W. Tankard, Jr., "Nuclear Weapons Literacy and Its Correlates," Peace Research 16, no. 1 (January 1984), pp. 30-34.

8 Mark R. Levy and John P. Robinson, "The 'Huh?' Factor: Untangling TV News," Columbia Journalism Review 25, no. 2 (July/August 1986), p. 48.

9 J. Frederick Little, Critical Thinking and Decision Making (Toronto: Butterworths, 1980), p. v.

10 Mortimer J. Adler and Charles Van Doren, How to Read a Book (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972), p. x.

11 Little, op. cit.

How to Read a Book.[12] Heiman and Slomianko's Critical Thinking Skills argues that the skill that is basic to critical thinking is "engaging in an internal dialogue."[13] Here we take the same approach by suggesting 12 key questions that will help a person to read a newspaper article more skillfully. The focus here is on newspaper articles, although many of the same principles would also apply to magazine articles or television news stories.

The critical thinking approach has not been a tradition in journalism education, although it perhaps should. Students being trained to work as journalists, in particular, might benefit from such an approach. One author has recently pointed out the need to teach journalism students to be more skeptical.[14]

For the general reader, there could be a two-way interaction between critical thinking and newspaper reading: Critical thinking should improve one's ability to read the newspaper (and therefore to be a better citizen), but reading the newspaper is also an excellent way to practice and strengthen the skills of critical thinking.

The following questions are suggested as a set that the thoughtful reader might want to ask in an internal dialogue while reading a newspaper article. The questions need not be used for every newspaper article. Indeed, evidence suggests that the typical reader ignores 67% of the stories in the newspaper.[15] But for a newspaper article judged to be important, many of the following questions might be appropriate.

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12 Adler and Van Doren, op. cit.

13 Marcia Heiman and Joshua Slomianko, Critical Thinking Skills (Washington, D.C.: National Education Association, 1985), p. 7.

14 Maria Braden, "Stamping Out Automatons," The Quill 74:5 (May 1986), pp. 26-28.

15 Graber, op. cit., p. 82.

1. What kind (genre) of journalism is it? Is it a news story, a feature story, an editorial, a news analysis, a column or a review? There are cues to help the reader recognize each of these. The cues include location in the newspaper, labels, style of writing, and bylines. News stories are reports of recent events judged to be newsworthy. The stories may be from wire services such as the Associated Press or the New York Times Service, or they may be written by reporters on the newspaper's staff. The first sentence (or lead) of a news story will usually tell about an occurrence that happened yesterday or today. Feature stories usually lack the strong element of timeliness that news stories have. They use a more casual style, and might start off with a narrative, a question or a bit of description. Editorials are usually found in the upper left corner of a designated editorial page. This is the place where the newspaper expresses its opinions on current events. News analyses are usually labeled as such in a smaller headline, perhaps in a box, included with the article. Such analyses are used to provide background or explain the meaning of news events. They give the reporter more latitude for expressing opinion than does a news story. A column usually appears on the editorial page or on the page opposite, called the "Op Ed" page. Columns express the opinions and views of their authors. Some columns are by well-known writers and are nationally syndicated. Reviews are evaluations of performances or works of art such as movies, concerts, plays and books. They are usually found within a relevant section of the newspaper, such as the entertainment or books sections. Reviews may contain some reporting of factual information, but they also contain the reviewers' opinions concerning the items being reviewed.[16]

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[16] The various types of newspaper content are discussed further in Michael Ryan and James W. Tankard, Jr., Basic News Reporting (Palo Alto, Cal.: Mayfield, 1977), pp. 14-17.

One important distinction that journalists attempt to make, and that readers should also, is between fact and opinion. Facts should be verifiable information that several observers would agree on; opinion is the personal beliefs and attitudes of the writer. According to the rules that journalists work by, news stories and feature stories should contain factual information, while the other types of newspaper articles that have been discussed can contain opinion as well as fact.

2. What kind of occurrence or event produced the news story? Was it a speech? A news conference? A telephone interview? Was the journalist an eyewitness? Journalists should be most reliable in reporting events they actually witnessed. Many times, however, a reporter has to get a story by interviewing other people who were witnesses. To complicate things further for the reader, sometimes a news story does not make it clear what kind of event produced the story, and whether or not the journalist was present as the event occurred.

3. In terms of traditional news values, why is this story in the newspaper? Journalists select events or occurrences for news coverage on the basis of certain criteria, typically called "news values." While the lists may vary, the following are often included in lists of news values:

Proximity -- Does the event relate to the immediate coverage area?

Prominence -- Are well-known people, institutions or issues involved in the event?

Timeliness -- Did the event occur recently (or will it occur in the future)?

Impact -- Did (or will) the event have an effect on people's lives?

Magnitude -- Are there large numbers or amounts involved?

Conflict -- Are there physical (or verbal) conflicts or clashes involved?

Oddity -- Does the event have a strange, abnormal or unpredictable twist?[17]

Usually it is possible to identify two or more of these news values at work in any news story published in a newspaper.

4. Was this event created in order to get coverage? Daniel Boorstin applied the term pseudo-event to any event planned or planted for the immediate purpose of being reported or reproduced.[18] Examples of pseudo-events range from a mayor cutting a ribbon to open a local supermarket to the hijacking of a jetliner by a gang of terrorists. The concept can also be applied to many of the journalists' most common means of gathering information, including news releases, press conferences and even news interviews. Once a pseudo-event is detected, three further questions seem relevant: 1. If the event was created in order to get coverage, what are the goals or purposes of the people who created it? 2. How might these purposes color or shape the event itself? 3. What impact does it have on the reader's view of the world to be presented this event as if it is something important (when indeed it might not be).

5. What is the writer's background? Is the writer liberal or conservative? What is the writer's reputation for accuracy? Has the writer won the Pulitzer Prize, or some other respected journalism award? If you are reading an article by Anthony Lewis saying that President Reagan's presidency is effectively over because of the controversy surrounding the Iranian arms deal, for instance, it might help to interpret this information if you know something of Lewis's background. One thing that can help is to

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[17] A more detailed description of news values can be found in Ryan and Tankard, op. cit., pp. 105-109.

[18] Daniel J. Boorstin, The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), p. 11.

read a writer over a period of time so as to become familiar with that person. What is the author's past record for making predictions and judgments, for instance?

6. Is there obvious bias on the part of the writer of the article (or the writer of the headline)? A few years ago when John Anderson was running as an independent candidate for President, an Austin, Texas, newspaper published a story with the headline "Lonely Anderson." The first sentence of the story said, "It's the fate of the independent candidate -- nobody pays much attention." The story went on to say that Anderson would speak at the University of Texas on Friday, but that campus police weren't worried about his being mobbed. The newspaper, which had already made clear in editorials its opposition to Anderson, was prejudging a news event that had not yet occurred -- a pretty clear example of bias. Bias is not always easy to detect. One tool that can sometimes help in identifying bias is a set of statement categories developed by S.I. Hayakawa.[19] The well-known general semanticist presents the following three types of statements that people can make:

Reports -- statements capable of verification and excluding inferences and judgments.

Inferences -- statements about the unknown made on the basis of the known.

Judgments -- statements that express approval or disapproval of an occurrence, person or object.

The Austin newspaper's statement about Anderson, being a statement about the future and thus a statement about the unknown made on the basis

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[19] S.I. Hayakawa, Language in Thought and Action, 2nd ed. (New York, Harcourt, Brace & World, 1964), pp. 38-44.

of the known, was clearly an inference. Reporters writing news stories should stick to reports, although the same restriction does not apply to editorial writers, columnists or reviewers. One approach to recognizing bias is to be on the alert for inferences and judgments.

7. Is it possible to verify the information in the article? Is information given in the article that would allow you to verify the information? Are sources named, for instance? Or is information attributed to an anonymous source such as "officials" or "a White House source"? Sometimes a journalist has legitimate reasons for not divulging a source, such as the need to protect that person from harm or retaliation. Nevertheless, information from unnamed sources is not verifiable and should be regarded with more skepticism than information from named sources.

8. What sources are used in the newspaper article? Is there more than one source? The journalistic rule of objectivity ordinarily requires the reporter to seek the views of both sides (or of all sides) of a controversy. Even a statement that a source refused comment indicates that the journalist attempted to meet this standard. Are the sources that are cited official sources only? Journalists tend to choose official sources because they are more readily available and are often willing to talk to the press.[20] But it should be remembered that such sources will be presenting the official line or version of an occurrence or issue. This official version may displace or override others that it would be beneficial for the public to hear about. In the reporting of an accident at a nuclear power plant, for instance, it might be important to get opinions on the health risks from experts who are not

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20 Bernard Roshco, Newsmaking (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), pp. 74-75.

affiliated with the nuclear power plant, the electric utility, or government agencies regulating and supervising the industry.[21]

9. What kind of play is given to the story? Journalists provide a number of cues to the reader to indicate the importance of a story. The most significant of these are the choice of page on which the story is displayed, the placement on the page, the headline size, and the presence or absence of an accompanying photograph or illustration. The front page is the position of greatest importance in the newspaper, with inside pages suggesting less and less importance. A story that appears very far back in the newspaper is less likely to be seen by the reader, and is sometimes said to be "buried." The top right corner of a newspaper page is generally the position of highest emphasis. A story located across the entire top of the page with a so-called "banner" headline is also being given a great deal of emphasis, particularly if this occurs on the front page. Headline size is also an important indicator of emphasis, with larger headlines indicating stories of greater importance. Headlines can increase in size in several ways -- in the size of the type used, in the number of columns the headline takes up, and in the number of rows or "decks" in the headline. Finally, the presence of a photograph or illustration with a story is often an indicator of importance, although it is not as definite an indicator as the others. Often a photograph will be run just because it is a "good picture," or to add some variety to a page that would otherwise be a mass of uninterrupted gray type.

10. What is omitted or left out? This question can be asked at several levels. First, what information is left out of the story that is being read?

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[21] Sharon Dunwoody, James W. Tankard, Jr., and Michael Ryan, "Risk Analysis for Public Consumption: Media Coverage of the Ginna Nuclear Reactor Accident." Paper presented to the Mass Communication and Society Division and the Science Writing Educators Group, Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication annual convention, Norman, Oklahoma, August, 1986.

Are there pertinent facts that are being omitted? For instance, a newspaper reporting a state legislative investigation into improper gifts from the telephone company to journalists omitted that some of those journalists were its own employees. That newspaper was omitting pertinent facts. At a more general level, are there significant events that have occurred but are not reported anywhere in the newspaper at all? For instance, a newspaper that did not report a speech by Ralph Nader criticizing nuclear power at a time when the local community had to vote on a nuclear power plant would be practicing this kind of omission. Finally, are there some events that are missed by not just one newspaper but by most of the press? While these omissions are much more difficult to recognize, they undoubtedly do occur. Some stories are missed because there are no "events" for journalists to focus on. Poverty in America is an example of this kind of story. Michael Harrington's book The Other America was written largely to correct for this omission by the mainstream press.[22] Other stories might not be reported because they don't fit the ideological leanings of the press as a whole. For instance, most of the press has not reported that about one-half of all people who defect to the United States later elect to return to their native countries. The press did not want to acknowledge that so many people voluntarily chose to live under communism.[23]

11. How is the event framed? The same event can be presented in various frames that give it a drastically different appearance and even a different ideological valence.[24] For instance, Watergate was initially framed

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22 Michael Harrington, The Other America: Poverty in the United States (Baltimore: Penguin, 1962).

23 Jonathan Alter, "The News That Didn't Fit," Newsweek, December 29, 1986, p. 57.

24 Todd Gitlin, The Whole World Is Watching (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).

by the press as a "caper" and as a partisan issue during a political election.[25] This made it easy not to take it seriously and to regard it as only "campaign rhetoric."

It was only later, when the frame was shifted to "abuse of Presidential power" and "threat to democracy," that Watergate was taken more seriously.

12. What are the "latent" values being transmitted by the news article? News stories can have manifest and latent functions. A story of a young couple getting married in a Jack In The Box restaurant, for instance, serves the manifest function of telling the newspaper audience about an unusual and interesting event. On the surface, it satisfies the news value of oddity. A latent function of the news story, however, may be to reinforce the traditional institution of marriage. One message being sent by the news story is that even though the couple has rejected some of the norms of society, they still are getting married. A whole set of latent values that may be transmitted repeatedly by the press in general has been identified by sociologist Herbert Gans.[26] These include individualism, small-town pastoralism and responsible capitalism.

## Conclusion

The act of reading a newspaper article is not necessarily a simple task. A reader who takes the task more seriously than the average reader might reap the benefits of greater knowledge, greater understanding, and perhaps even greater wisdom. This paper has attempted to take a critical thinking approach to the reading of a newspaper article. As in other works in the

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25 Lang and Lang, op. cit., p. 59.

26 Herbert J. Gans, Deciding What's News (New York: Vintage, 1980), pp. 39-69.

critical thinking area, the approach has been one of suggesting questions that the thoughtful reader should think about and try to answer. The reader will not want to try to answer these questions for every story in the newspaper. Readers should continue to screen stories and select those of the greatest importance to them for more careful reading. Even then, not all the questions will be relevant for every story.

As in the development of critical thinking skills in other areas, practice is necessary to become proficient. The 12 questions for appraising newspaper articles will become most useful when their use becomes to some extent "second nature." Each of the questions in this paper has brought up issues that could be gone into in much greater detail. The topics suggested by the 12 questions are suitable for inclusion in courses in Mass Communication Theory, Mass Communication and Society, and Introduction to Mass Communication. In these classes, exercises can be developed to give students practice in developing the skills of critical thinking.

If this kind of thinking is applied by more people to the reading of newspapers, the result should be a less gullible and better informed public. In these days of widespread "information overload,"[27] the need for reading the daily newspaper in a critical way becomes even more important.

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[27] Orrin E. Klapp, "Meaning Lag in the Information Society," Journal of Communication 32, no. 2 (Spring 1982), pp. 56-66.